

# Change Is Good

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT

*Editor's Note: The author presented a version of this article in his opening remarks at the 2008 NAIS Annual Conference in Radio City Music Hall, New York City.*

**T**he lyrics of The Band's song, "Change Is Good," just about sum up NAIS's perspective on the future and its promise for American schools:

Change is then, change is now  
Change is what, change is how  
Change is this and change is that  
Change is where change is at  
Change is good...

The question before all educators is *how* and *how quickly* we change, not *whether* we'll change. On this topic, I am reminded of *The New Yorker* cartoon of the business traveler in his pajamas and slippers, seated on the side of his bed, answering a telephone call, and hearing, "This is your wake-up call: Change or die."

On one level, schools are the most resistant of all institutions to change, more so than even churches. In fact, much of the most inventive and effective teaching is emergent not in the U.S. educational system at large but in the corporate and military worlds, where their "courses" are team-oriented, real-world problem-based, and action-driven. Why are business and the military so progressive in their teaching methods? Because the stakes are so high and the territory so hostile, as exemplified by what participants have dubbed the National War College: V.U.C.A. University, preparing them for a future of *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*. In contrast, why are we so cautious? An extraordinary Renaissance man, an independent school colleague and friend of mine, died recently, but his mantra resonates with me continually: "In the rush to the future, don't lose the best of the past." We're resistant to change and probably overly cautious because there's a lot at stake. But I would say to my friend, while we won't ever give up the best of the past, I'm afraid we *will* see a rush to the future. Profound technological, social, and environ-



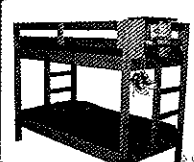
mental changes are driving this need for concomitant institutional change. These changes are not asking us to pay attention; they are telling us to get moving — and quickly.

Speaking of a Renaissance man invites one to think about why the Renaissance is such a touchstone for Western civilization and how it might be a context for our thinking about schools of the future. I believe education in America needs a similar, dramatic rebirth as that which brought Europe out of the Dark Ages. Is it not so that American K-12 education is at its nadir, facing its own Dark Ages? Does anyone really think that the *No Child Left Behind* Act and its deadening impact of high-stakes testing and school rankings will cure the ills of the larger educational system? Regarding independent schools, will resentment of the 1 percent — the privileged few with access to high quality independent school education — cause legislators in the U.S. to react as their counterparts in Great Britain and Australia have, with threats to remove the tax-favored status and to legislate independent schools into compliance with government-imposed requirements? Will our own runaway tuitions ultimately alienate even our friends?

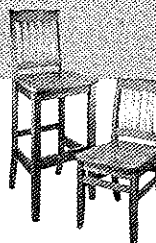
And, for all of us, what of the deeper issue that Sir Kenneth Robinson so eloquently underscores in his book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*? At the heart of the problem, he tells us, is our obsessive preoccupation with academic ability and the confusion of academic ability with intelligence. There is, as Robinson points out, "much more to intelligence than academic ability and much more to education than developing it."

To point to the schools of the future, the educational system, public and private, needs a compass — a

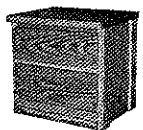
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device invented, incidentally, during the Renaissance, changing everything for that time forward, just as the computer and the Internet it spawned have changed everything for our times.

Thinking of the compass as symbol, I am reminded of the film *Michael Clayton*. The film opens and closes with a symbolic car ride. In an early key scene, the Michael Clayton character is annoyed because of a broken GPS navigation system in his car (later we find out the nearly fatal reason for its malfunctioning). At the close of the film, the protagonist jumps into a cab and gives the driver \$50 for a taxi ride to "anywhere." The two bookend scenes convey the sense of directionless wandering tied to the central theme of the film, the character's identity problem: Who is Michael Clayton? Lawyer? Private Investigator? Restaurateur? Gambler? Dealmaker? Fixer? Father? Brother? Schools in America are on such a ride ourselves, suddenly not certain of our direction, not even certain of our identity in the larger society. Whom are we trying to serve these days? What's the value of traditional educational institutions in such a fluid, global society? Why mess with instructional techniques that got us to this point? Is our focus on a college-prep program good enough?

Enter, stage right, the Renaissance. A re-awakening. A re-discovery of the art and science and philosophy and literature and mathematics of Ancient Greece and Rome. A marriage of art, science, and commerce that lifted its beneficiaries out of a deep slumber into a whole new world, literally, of building, and discovery, and invention, and art, and exploration. Ultimately, the fertile creative soil of the Renaissance gave birth to the genius of the Enlightenment, and the religious, political, and scientific breakthroughs of that age. NAIS hopes that, through a series of initiatives (including the Schools of the Future theme of our conference in New York City in 2008 and in Chicago in 2009), we will contribute to a modern-day Renaissance

All of this is with the goal of unleashing and communicating not only the creative and inspired talent within our schools, but also in the spirit of a larger public purpose informing everything we do.

of reshaping how we "school" children in America. We seek to model "classrooms of the future" to demonstrate inventive teaching lessons and to invite participants to partake in a whole series of "digital adventures" (available to explore from the NAIS website, [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org)). Thanks to a \$100,000 matching gift from the Edward E. Ford Foundation, NAIS will be creating a Professional Learning Community online for teachers, with 25 independent school "creatives" this year and 25 more next year, to seed new experiments in teaching and learning. We'll invite everyone in NAIS-member schools to join one or more of our industry's forays into the Web 2.0's digital commons: wikis and discussion boards and postings of lesson video clips, a virtual community exploring a plethora of ideas and possibilities for teaching and learning. All of this is with the goal of unleashing and communicating not only the creative and inspired talent within our schools, but also in the spirit of a larger public purpose informing everything we do.

And, yes, there must be a public purpose to private education; our favored status and freedom from governmental controls dictating that we give back more than we take. There are a number of ways for us to do this, of course, but, ultimately, the best is to model for the entire PS-12 industry how to evolve into forward-looking, innovative, change-adept, engaging laboratories of learning.

It's the least we can do.

*Patrick F. Bassett is the president of NAIS.*